

Who Was at the Cross?

The gospel descriptions of the crucifixion appear to be eyewitness accounts. But who were the witnesses? According to Matthew 26:56, all the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested, and most of them probably stayed away from the crucifixion out of fear of their own arrest. John 18:15-27 says that Peter's fear of arrest caused him to repeatedly deny that he even knew Jesus.

The crucifixion took place at a location called Golgotha, which was probably just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Most likely it was beside a road leading out from one of the city's gates. Thus the followers of Jesus would have been able to get there fairly easily. But who actually went there? To try to answer this question, we first need to look at what each gospel says about the matter:

Gospel of Matthew

According to this gospel, the various witnesses included Roman soldiers, Jewish officials, passersby who mocked Jesus, and two men crucified at the same time. The only reference to followers of Jesus is found in Matthew 27:55-56, which says that many women were "watching from a distance", and specifically names "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons." Unlike male followers, these women would probably have been allowed to watch without being arrested, provided that they didn't try to interfere.

Gospel of Mark

The account in this gospel is very similar to that in Matthew. In fact most biblical scholars believe that Matthew copied most of his account from Mark. In any case, Mark 15:40-41 also says that many women watched from a distance and specifically mentions "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome."

Gospel of Luke

The author of this gospel also apparently copied most of his account of the crucifixion from Mark. The only mention of Jesus' followers is in Luke 23:49, which says that some of them watched from a distance, but doesn't give any names.

Gospel of John

The account in this gospel differs considerably from the other three. It says that several women and one disciple stood "near the cross", and that Jesus spoke to them from the cross. The women are identified as Jesus' mother Mary, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clophas (or Cleophas), and Mary Magdalene. The disciple is identified only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved".

The unnamed disciple mentioned in John is often called the "Beloved Disciple". He has traditionally been identified as John the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples, and the author of the gospel. But many scholars have questioned this identification, and the matter is still very much in dispute. But whoever he was, this gospel says that he and several women, including Jesus' mother, were near the cross, close enough to talk to Jesus and hear his words.

The other three gospels never mention a "disciple whom Jesus loved". They also say nothing about any disciple or any women being near the cross, or talking with Jesus while he was on the cross. Their accounts of the words that Jesus spoke from the cross are also completely different from the words attributed to him in John's gospel.

All of this suggests that the author of John had a source of information that wasn't available to the other gospel writers. This source is usually assumed to be the un-named Beloved Disciple himself, and a statement at John 21:24 seems to confirm this. Thus, this un-named disciple was probably the eyewitness for John's account of the crucifixion.

But who was the source of information for the other accounts? Most

scholars think that Matthew and Luke got nearly all of their information about the crucifixion from Mark, though they sometimes made minor alterations. Thus, Mark's account is generally regarded as the original. And according to church tradition, Mark got most of his information about what happened directly from Peter.

But since Peter almost certainly didn't witness the crucifixion himself, who did he get his information from? Apparently not from the Beloved Disciple, since the accounts are so different. Instead, some people have suggested Simon of Cyrene, the man who was forced to carry the cross, although the gospels don't say whether he stayed to watch the crucifixion. Another possibility is that Peter talked to one or more of the women who watched from a distance. Matthew and Mark name several of them, in both cases specifying Mary Magdalene first.

If Mark got his information from Peter, and Peter got it from someone else, that would make Mark's account third-hand. But it actually reads like a first-hand account. In fact many scholars believe that Mark also had another source of information, a lost gospel known as the Pre-Markan Passion Narrative which was written fairly soon after the crucifixion by an unknown person who had a good knowledge of what happened. Evidence for Mark's possible use of such a lost document can be discerned in certain subtle details of his account.

Thus, the gospel stories of the crucifixion appear to be based on two primary sources of information: (1) The memories of the un-named Beloved Disciple, and (2) a now-lost early passion narrative used directly by Mark and second-hand by Matthew and Luke. Some additional details may have been provided by other sources such as Peter.

Although these conclusions are plausible, some people think that they leave some important questions unanswered. For example, why is John apparently the only gospel that mentions the presence of Jesus' mother Mary? If she was there, shouldn't such an important piece of information be in all of the accounts?

Some people also ask why John doesn't mention the followers who watched from a distance, and the other gospels don't mention the followers who were near the cross. One possible explanation is that all of the accounts actually refer to the same group, which gradually moved closer to the cross. Or possibly two separate groups were present, but each gospel writer only had information about one of them.

A more serious problem relates to what Jesus said while on the cross. What he says in John's account is completely different from what he says in the other accounts. It has been argued that different witnesses to an event often give different descriptions of it later. Certainly that could account for minor inconsistencies. But in this case the accounts are totally different.

Questions have also been raised about the story of the spear thrust. According to John 19:34, a Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear to make sure that he was dead. Yet the other gospels say nothing about this.

The various disparities have led some scholars to question the accuracy of certain parts of one or more of the accounts. But most Christians believe that all the accounts are basically correct, and that the discrepancies are simply the result of variations in what different witnesses saw or remembered.

Note: If we try to list all the specific individuals mentioned in the various accounts, we get the following result:

1. Mary Magdalene (mentioned by Matthew, Mark, and John)
2. Mary the mother of James and Joses (mentioned by Matthew and Mark)
3. The mother of Zebedee's sons (mentioned by Matthew)
4. Salome (mentioned by Mark) -- Many scholars think that this is the same person as (3), i. e., the mother of Zebedee's sons

5. Mary the mother of Jesus (mentioned by John)
6. Mary the wife of Clophas (who was probably Joseph's brother) (mentioned by John)
7. An un-named sister of Jesus' mother (mentioned by John) -- Many scholars think that this is the same person as (6), i.e., the wife of Clophas
8. The un-named Beloved Disciple (mentioned by John)

Much of the debate about the identities of these people centers on the Beloved Disciple. But there has also been a lot of discussion about the second person on the list, Mary the mother of James and Joses. Sometimes called "the other Mary", she appears in the story again (in some accounts) as one of the women who accompany Mary Magdalene to the tomb on Easter morning.

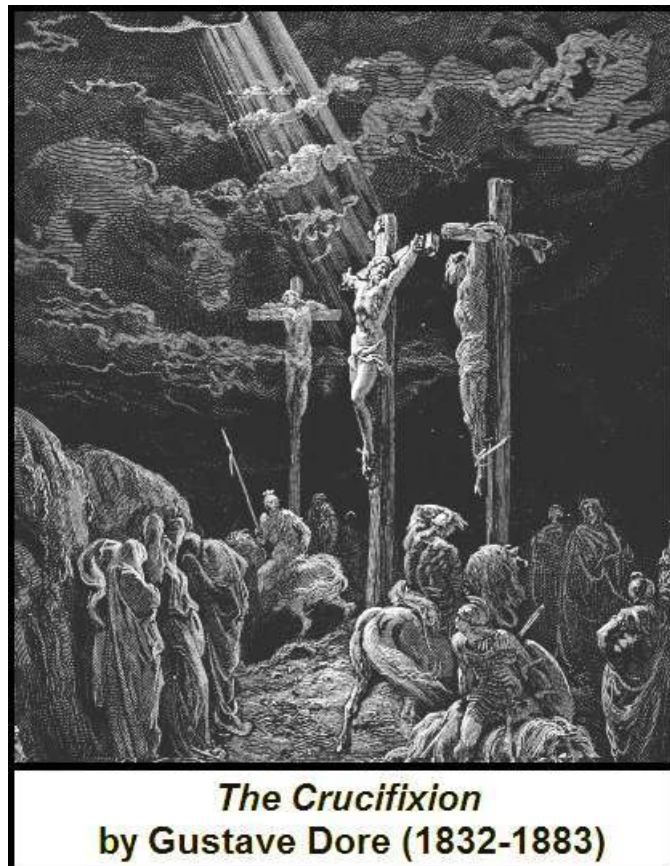
Several different identifications have been proposed for this "other Mary". Some people think that she was a previous wife of Joseph and the mother of his other children. Others say that she was the same person as the sixth individual on the list, i.e., the wife of Clophas and possibly a sister (or half-sister) of Jesus' mother.

But some scholars argue for another, and very intriguing, possibility. They contend that this "other Mary" was actually the mother of Jesus! If this is correct, a major disparity would be eliminated, because Mark and Matthew would then agree with John that Jesus' mother was present at the scene.

There are two main pieces of evidence to support the theory that this Other Mary was the mother of Jesus: First, her name is Mary. And second, her sons James and Joses could be two of the four brothers of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:3.

But there is also a basic problem with this theory: For if this Other Mary really was the mother of Jesus, why don't Matthew and Mark say so? Instead, both authors seem to treat her as a minor character, and Matthew 28:1 even refers to her as "the other Mary".

In fact the whole matter of this woman's identity is very puzzling. But if it could be resolved, the possible conclusions could be very important.



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